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British Universities and Research in the Era of Brexit

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Introduction

On June 23, 2016, the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, forever changing the course of both Britain and Europe's futures. This unprecedented move, known as Brexit, has become one of the most consequential political events in modern European history. For the past few years, it has dominated European politics and thrown Britain into complete disarray. After two general elections, three prime ministers, tense negotiations, countless extensions, and 47 years of membership, the U.K. finally left the E.U. on January 31, 2020.

Two years ago, I was fortunate enough to obtain a research grant which I used to study a question that was often overlooked: How Brexit would impact British universities and research? Over the course of three weeks, I interviewed students, faculty, and administrators from universities across the U.K., as well as the head of the European Commission's directorate-general for education, youth, sport and culture in Brussels, Belgium. I learned that Brexit will likely have adverse effects on Britain's researchers and universities. In this paper, I outline ways in which Brexit can, and has, effected British research. Britain is known for its first-class universities and research. But now, it is not clear if British academics will be able to collaborate with their European colleagues in the same way, which could slow the progress of British research across all subjects and disciplines.

In terms of evidence, I will rely on news articles, as well as scholarly publications on Brexit. I will also incorporate some of the research I conducted during my time in Britain.

The rest of this paper is divided into six parts. In the first part, I sketch the history of Brexit. Specifically, I consider why it came about, how it happened, and where things stand today. In the second part, I dicuss Britain's academic prowess and its reliance on research done by universities. In the third and fourth part, I write about Brexit's effects on British research funding. In the fifth, sixth, and seventh sections, I write about how Brexit will affect the flow of researchers, faculty, and students to British universities.

History of Brexit

Brexit itself was a result of a failed political gamble. In the midst of turmoil in Europe (i.e. euro crisis and migration crisis), U.K.-E.U. relations were a key issue leading up to the 2015 general election for the House of Commons. To deal with this issue, and to calm the right-wing of his party, then Prime Minister David Cameron promised to hold a national referendum on Britain's E.U. membership. But this promise was not made in good faith. Prior to the 2015 elections, the Conservatives were in a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. Cameron expected to retain the coalition and he knew the Liberal Democrats would stop a referendum. The

Conservatives, however, unexpectedly won an outright majority in Parliament, forcing Cameron to hold the referendum. He fell victim to his own success.

Leading up to the referendum, most people expected the "Remain" campaign (which was backed by 10 Downing Street) to win. But in a shocking turn of events, the "Leave" campaign won, having capitalized on growing anxiety in Britain regarding issues directly related to the E.U. such as trade, national sovereignty, unmanaged globalism, and immigration. In short, Brexit was a result of grave political miscalculations and reflective of the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, and indeed throughout the world.

Cameron soon resigned and was succeeded by Theresa May, his Home Secretary. After roughly three years of negotiations with the E.U., and a failed snap-election that left her politically-handicapped, May was unable to pass a withdrawal agreement through Parliament. She, therefore, had to resign and was succeeded by Boris Johnson, an already polarizing figure in British Politics. A few months into his premiership, he called a snap-election and, unlike May, led the Conservatives to a land-slide victory. With an 80-seat majority, Johnson was able to pass a withdrawal agreement and the U.K. officially left the E.U. on January 31st, 2020.

British Universities

Among the UK's greatest assets are its universities. The UK is home to some of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world, and its system of higher education is constantly ranked the best Europe and among the best in the world. To put Britain's academic prowess into perspective, the World University Ranker ranks three British Universities within its top ten best universities in the world (Oxford, Cambridge, and Imperial College London came in 1st, 2nd, and 9th place respectively)[1]. No other EU universities broke the top 10. In fact, excluding the UK, no university in any EU member state broke the top 30. So, naturally, the next question to ask is: Will Brexit negatively or positively effect British academia?

The consensus among the people I interviewed, and the view among academics in general, is that Brexit will likely hurt British academia. In their opinions, the EU's academic infrastructure has allowed the UK to obtain more research funding, promoted collaboration between European researchers, and has generally made British universities more prestigious. And, because the EU membership strengthens British universities, it has allowed them to attract stronger students and faculty.

Research Funding

The EU program most relevant to research is Horizon 2020, which refers to the 80 billion euros the EU has made available for research funding from 2014 to 2020. The body responsible for awarding these funds is the European Research Council (ERC). Researchers from all 28 EU member states can apply for 1 of 5 types of grants based on their experience as researchers and the progress they have already made in their particular area of study. In terms of how the grants are awarded, the ERC follows one basic rule: fund the best. In other words, there is no minimum or maximum amount of funding any country or university may receive, nor is there a rule requiring

[1] *World University Rankings 2021*

equal funding for different fields of research. Whichever proposals the ERC determines are of the highest academic caliber are awarded the grants.

Because of the lack of laws limiting the amount of research funding any one country or university can receive, the UK has been able to attract a disproportionately high amount of research funding from the ERC, having received 14% of total funds allocated to Horizon 2020 (Jones). In fact, between 2014 and 2020, UK universities won over 7 billion euros of ERC research funding, second only to Germany (Schiermeier). These facts are not only a testament to the quality of research done in the UK, but they also prove that Britain has benefited financially from its EU membership. Britain's success, however, comes as a double-edged sword. Since Britain has been so successful in obtaining ERC grants, it has become increasingly dependent on them. As a result, the UK now spends a lower percentage of its GDP on research funding than other European countries do.

Due to the lack of aforementioned regulations, the degree to which universities benefit from and depend on EU funding varies. For instance, Oxford and Cambridge, the crown jewels of Britain's academic crown, have attract high amounts of ERC grants. Yet these two universities are certainly not dependent on EU funds. If they were to lose access to EU funding because of Brexit, they would certainly take a hit financially. But, the Oxbridge colleges would most likely adapt and replace their lost research money, as their endowments are among the largest in the world.

Other universities are much more dependent on EU funding. The best example is Southampton Solent University, whose EU funding makes up about 91.35% of its total research grant money (Matthews). For universities like Solent, whose research is highly dependent on European funding, a loss of access to Horizon 2020 (and its successor schemes) could be catastrophic. Their futures depend on the circumstances with which Britain will leave the EU, which are currently uncertain.

Another aspect to consider is how Brexit can affect different areas of research. Since the ERC does not discriminate among subjects, it is one of the only competitive grant programs that puts "blue-sky" areas of research, such as philosophy or archaeology, on a level playing field with areas of research that are considered more pertinent, like medicine or neurobiology. Thus, many "blue-sky" subjects have become dependent on Horizon 2020. While in England I interviewed a scientist that studied the brains of insects. Since he had an ERC starter grant, he was able to run a fully-operating lab with four assistants. And he made it clear that it would have been practically impossible to get the amount of funding he did, given his area of research, if it were not for the ERC.

Considering how important EU money is to British research, the next question to ask is "What kind of access will the UK have to Horizon 2020 and its successor programs?" Regretfully, I, nor anyone, can answer this question. Currently, there are three categories countries are placed into with regards to Horizon 2020. First, there are the EU member states, which have full access Horizon 2020. Second, there are sixteen countries that are considered "Associated Countries," and they are either EU-candidate countries or part of the European Free Trade Association. These countries have full access to Horizon 2020 money and can host ERC grants. They also benefit from "Observer Status" at program committees-- the committees that help govern the EU's

research infrastructure. In terms of the buy-in for Associated Countries, the deals these countries make with the EU are all different. But generally, the fees they pay are based off their GDP. Lastly, there are Non-associated third countries that, for the most part, do not have individual access to EU funding schemes.

UK access to EU money, at least in the context of research infrastructure, is completely dependent on the deal with which Britain will leave the EU, should it leave with one. Right now, the UK, by virtue of its EU membership, has full access to all Horizon 2020 funding. Under the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, which was negotiated by Theresa May's government, the UK would retain access to Horizon 2020 until the program ends. Additionally, in the event of a no-deal, May's government agreed to underwrite all Horizon 2020 grants awarded before the exit date and all successful applications to schemes that are open to third countries submitted after the exit date. However, May's deal did not pass Parliament and she is no longer Prime Minister. As of the writing of this report, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has yet to negotiate another deal with the EU, nor has he made the no-deal assurances May's government did. Should the UK leave the EU without a deal and fail to make necessary arrangements, the UK will lose access to Horizon 2020.

Post-Brexit Solutions to Research Funding

If the UK leaves with the terms laid out in the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, it would have access to Horizon 2020 till the scheme ends. If the UK wants access to Horizon Europe, it would still have to negotiate a deal with the EU Commission to obtain Associated Country status. Should Britain choose do this, its universities would have access to all European funding schemes. In this case, the only difference with regards to ERC grants would be that as an Associated Country, the UK would only have "Observer Status" at program committees. As previously mentioned, these committees help govern the EU's research infrastructure, and only member states get to vote on policies. However, the UK could still influence the direction of future funding schemes. Most decisions in these committees are made by consensus rather than votes. Therefore, the UK might be able to use its academic prowess to gain influence. The use of this tactic is not unprecedented. The Swiss, despite not having the voting powers member states do, had a significant level of say in the creation of Horizon 2020.

Alternatively, the UK could set up a funding scheme of its own. The UK could, in theory, allocate a portion of the money it would save in EU membership fees to start their own version of Horizon 2020. This would suffice in giving British researchers a place to apply for funds and it would help calm uncertainties among universities.

This alternative, however, is not without its flaws. First, there would not be as much potential money available to British researchers. The UK alone cannot allocate more funds to research than 27 other countries can combined. Additionally, the UK would be the sole payer of administrative costs, which would likely be high considering the program would be new. Second, a national funding scheme would inherently not promote as much international collaboration as a European-wide framework would. Third, the prestige would be missing. As previously stated, Horizon 2020 is considered to be the global gold-standard of competitive funding programs because of its history of excellence and competitive selection process. It would take years for a British framework program to earn the reputation European ones already have. The grant selection

for a national scheme would not be as competitive as a scheme that encompasses an entire continent, which could potentially harm the quality of research produced in Britain. Also, ERC grants are given to the "best" applicants, regardless of political party, nationality, or area of study. A scheme run by a single country, however, is more vulnerable to political influence. In fact, the UK government has already made clear that should they have to pick up EU research funding, they would put more money into fields they prioritize.

Lastly, British universities have already begun creating individual partnerships with other universities in Europe. An example is the Oxford-Berlin partnership. In late 2017, Oxford signed an agreement with four universities in Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin. Since then, academics from these institutions have begun participating in workshops with the goal of creating strategic research partnerships. This method of creating links between individual institutions could help British universities retain access to European research and innovation, though it certainly bores more labor and cost than simply being part of established EU framework.

Collaboration Among Researchers

Collaboration is a critical aspect of research, as innovative ideas and ground-breaking discoveries are often made when researchers work together and share ideas. Part of the reason Horizon 2020 has produced such excellent work is that it has helped foster collaboration between researchers on both the European and international levels. Researchers can submit proposals to the ERC in tandem with colleagues from European and, in some cases, non-European countries. In fact, sometimes the ERC will favor projects that create international collaboration.

The significance and importance of research collaboration cannot be understated, as innovation in Europe is driven by universities. In the US, innovation is largely spearheaded by corporations. That is not to say that American universities do not conduct world-class research, because they do. But in fields such as technology, companies like Apple are the main innovators, or in medicine, it is large pharmaceutical companies that are constantly creating new drugs. Europe, however, relies on its systems of higher education to bring together researchers and scientists to create cutting-edge research in all areas, especially technology and medicine. Therefore, the UK fundamentally losing access to the networks of European research and academia, could negative societal impacts.

Flow of Researchers and University Faculty

Brexit can only hurt the flow of academics to British universities for three main reasons. First, exiting the EU will make it harder for potential faculty hires to both move and work in the UK. Second, many European academics want to work at an institution that can host ERC grants, especially those who already have one. And third, due to the rise of nationalist sentiments that resulted in Brexit, many academics may feel unwelcome in Britain. Almost every single person interviewed for this project either knew of colleagues who left the UK partly because of Brexit.

One of the pillars of the EU is the free movement of people. Currently, UK nationals have the right to work in any of the other 30 countries in the European Economic Area (EEA), and vice

versa. This makes it relatively easy for European researchers to work together and for British universities to hire European faculty. Once the UK leaves the EU, the "freedom of movement of workers" will no longer apply. In the best-case scenario, the UK could choose to streamline European researchers through their immigration process, possibly by granting them Tier 1 Visas. In turn, UK researchers wishing to work elsewhere in Europe would have to deal with the government of the country they wish to work in. This complication of movement of people will ultimately disadvantage Britain because European academics will likely be less willing to research and work at universities across the channel.

As previously stated, Horizon 2020 is the pinnacle of competitive funding schemes, and many European researchers, experienced and inexperienced alike, apply for grants. Young researchers want to be at institutions where they can apply for starter grants to begin their careers. More seasoned academics might want to be at institutions where they can apply for "Proof of Concept" grants to bring their work into the market. Considering the importance of ERC grants to many academics, British universities will most likely become less competitive in terms of attracting and retaining faculty and research staff should they lose access to these funds. Based on the insight I received from those I interviewed, younger researchers are more likely to leave UK institutions in favor of European ones. This is because for a new researcher, an ERC grant can significantly boost their reputations and it may give them access to resources they otherwise would not have had. Experienced academics, particularly those at the tail-end of their careers, are less willing to move and will likely depend on other sources to continue funding their research. Therefore, many British universities, especially those with large endowments, may be able to retain a relatively high number of their faculty members who have been at said institutions for over a decade. However, British universities across the board are more likely to lose younger academics, which could jeopardize their futures.

Brexit itself was fueled by nationalism, as evident by the Leave Campaign's anti-immigration stance. The pejorative way with which many Britons have spoken about immigrants over the last three years has made many EU-nationals living in the UK uncomfortable, and this problem is well beyond the control of any one university. British universities can find practical solutions to help EU researchers with funding and immigration. British universities cannot, however, fix the anti-immigrant attitudes Brexit has brought to light. In short, people are far less likely to move and work someplace they feel they do not belong.

Flow of Students to British Universities

Overall, the UK's EU membership helps its universities attract European students. As with faculty and researchers, EU students can move to the UK relatively easily. They also pay the same tuition fee as British nationals, which is currently 9,000 pounds a year. Non-European students pay higher fees. Additionally, the UK participates in ERASMUS+, a student exchange program available to all EU students. ERASMUS+, throughout the three decades of its existence, has played a significant role in building intellectual bridges between students across Europe.

Once the UK leaves the EU, the process for EU students to be able to live and study in the UK will naturally become harder, and they will likely be charged the same fees as other international students. Obviously, these two factors can only hurt the UK's ability to attract

European talent. With regard to ERASMUS+, the UK negotiate "Associated Country" status in the same way it can for Horizon 2020. It is consensus among UK universities that ERASMUS+ enhances the academic experience for both British and European students alike.

The inevitable fall in European students wanting to study in the UK can, however, be seen as a positive for some British universities. UK universities could start taking in more non-EU students. Specifically, they could focus on attracting students from Asian countries like China, India, and Japan, which have growing middle classes and have seen an increase in English speakers. Should the UK start taking in students from more areas of the world, they would, at least in theory, become more diverse. Also, since the entire international student population in British universities would be paying international fees, universities would generate more tuition revenue.

Brexit's impact on the student bodies of individual universities will vary. Universities like Oxford and Cambridge will likely not struggle in recruiting top-notch students. There are also UK universities that do not have many European students to begin with, so they are unlikely to be affected with respect to attracting students. Other British institutions, however, are far more dependent on Europe for students.

Finally, as mentioned in the previous section of this report, Brexit has megaphoned nationalist sentiments that can dissuade students from all corners of the world from choosing to study in the UK.

Conclusion

In closing, the degree to which British academia will be hurt long-term is completely uncertain. But one thing remains certain: Brexit will almost certainly damage British higher education. Universities across the UK are likely to lose research funding, European talent, and (in the worst-case scenario) access to the realm of European innovation.

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